B.C. seniors' advocate launches survey to assess impact of visitor restrictions during pandemic

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Jeanette Harper's 89-year-old mother used to read books to her great-grandson during his weekly visit to her care home in Nanaimo, B.C. But months into the COVID-19 pandemic and with tight visitor restrictions, Ms. Harper says her mother's Alzheimer's disease has worsened to the point she can hardly carry on conversations, a result, Ms. Harper believes, of isolation.

To hear more stories from people like Ms. Harper about the ways visitor restrictions affect them and their loved ones in nursing homes, B.C. seniors' advocate Isobel Mackenzie announced on Wednesday that her office is launching a province-wide survey to assess the impact of the visitor policy.

"We revised our visitor policy, but for many family members and residents, it is still very, very different from the reality of their visits before COVID-19," Ms. Mackenzie said at a news conference.

She said that because the pandemic will likely last for another year or even longer, the province needs to hear these voices to shape a policy. The survey is available until Sept. 30, and she said she hopes to deliver a report before or around the end of October.

The current provincial policy allows only one designated visitor for each resident and visits must take place in designated areas. It also requires visitors to book appointments in advance

and wear masks. But the rules on visit frequency, location and duration vary among different facilities.

"So there's a whole range in between. And we're trying to understand what is driving that range of visits," Ms. Mackenzie said.

Ms. Harper said she would like to see more consistency in the rules surrounding visits.

She and her sister used to take turns visiting her mother each day, she said, but now, as the family's designated visitor, she can see her mother for 30 minutes once a week, and her sister can see their mother only through a 15-minute window visit.

"That's been very difficult," she said. "It's very hard to engage my mother to even get [her] attention for that amount of time."

She said she hopes the policy could at least allow one more family member to visit.

Victoria resident Brenda Brophy said she is happy about the announcement of the survey, but she also wonders why B.C. cannot relax the policies further, as Prince Edward Island has done. Ontario allows two people to make indoor visits as long as they attest to having a negative test within two weeks.

Ms. Brophy now visits her mother, who turned 100 in April, every two weeks for an hour. The visits can be outside in a garden or inside in the chapel. But Ms. Brophy is not permitted to see her mother in her room, where they could sit together, listening to music or doing a jigsaw puzzle.

Ms. Brophy said her mother was always upbeat, but during phone calls in the past weeks, she could tell that she is down.

"We all accept that our loved ones are in the final chapter in their lives and to not be able to hold their hand and take that journey with them is the most cruel and inhuman thing that's ever happened in our history."

She added that she understands cases in B.C. are on the rise, but most infections are among younger people, and family members of residents are usually very vigilant.

In addition to allowing more family members to visit, Ms. Harper and Ms. Brophy want the province to expand visit frequency and duration.

Ms. Mackenzie said about 125 seniors in long-term care homes and assisted living facilities have died from COVID-19. Over the same time, more than 2,000 seniors living in those facilities have died of other causes.

People can complete the survey online, by mail, or by phone.

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